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"Active Readers . . . Obverse Tricksters": Trickster Texts and Cross-Cultural Reading

BRADLEY JOHN MONSMA

> In that "ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles," which is the culture of any people, the trickster is only one text among many; yet as master of all language, [the trickster] is the ensemble of ensembles, the meeting-place of all words.
>
> –Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa* (269)

Given that tricksters have populated the oral and textual narratives of many cultures since the beginning of words, they have long been the focus of much anthropological, ethnographic, and religious scholarship. More recently, characteristics common to many tricksters—shape-shifting, cross-dressing, disruption, playfulness, and liminality—have proven irresistable to critics and theorists of ethnic literatures looking for indigenous and/or marginalized voices with which to challenge the powerful discourses of mainstream critical theory. The foundational trope of trickster has aided the formation of new literary histories, articulated the resistance and reconstruction of communities through narrative, and encouraged reinterpretations of individual authors.

One of the most fully realized trickster theories is Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s presentation of the signifying monkey as a figure for African American formal language use (1988). For Gates, the liminal, double-voiced trickster at the crossroads becomes a metaphor for the African American critic, allowing him or her to begin to construct an African American literary history. Other theories with trickster traces have developed alongside Gates's work, notably Houston A. Baker Jr.'s vernacular theory based on the blues (1984), a tradition replete with tricksters, as well as Gerald Vi-

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zenor's theoretical writing based in his interpretations of the "compassionate" Anishinaabe trickster Naanabozho (1989). Each of these theories explores intersections of Western literary theory and non-Western subject matter yet attempts to articulate a critical perspective whose most significant source lies in discursive practices that predate Western philosophy. While Baker, Gates, and Vizenor deal with single literary traditions, the most recent critical examination of tricksters adopts "A Multicultural Perspective," to use the book's subtitle. *Tricksterism in Turn-of-the-Century American Literature* (1994), edited by Elizabeth Ammons and Annette White-Parks, collects essays on a "heterogeneity of texts, writers, and traditions" that "precludes simplistic generalizing" (ix). The editors attempt to articulate a critical space that both acknowledges the cultural specificity of trickster strategies and calls to question attempts at "trickster purism" that would limit the change and adaptability essential to many different tricksters. Since the volume's essays emphasize how writers of color in the United States at the turn-of-the-nineteenth-century have used tricksters to negotiate power relations in imperialist contexts and preserve cultural differences in dangerous times, the book takes a step toward articulating the need for trickster scholarship near the end of the twentieth century to understand how narrative tricksters that grow from inter-ethnic contexts facilitate thinking about cross-cultural interpretation.

Such new scholarship must respond to fictions by Maxine Hong Kingston, Ishmael Reed, and Gerald Vizenor, for example, that place tricksters on the borders between cultures and occasionally combine trickster traits from different oral cultures. As these tricksters—and the transformative texts in which they cavort—reveal the processes by which humans construct and reconstruct cultures, they enlighten not only "outsiders" but also those most self-assured in their understanding. Notorious border crossers, tricksters tend to elicit interpretive presumption and the possibility for misunderstanding. Trickster texts, therefore, position readers in relation to the difference of the text by confronting readers with their own potential for misunderstanding even while compelling participation in the act of creating meaning from shifting texts.

Examining interpretation through the lens of the cross-cultural trickster might be a way to address a persistent question in the criticism of multicultural literature:[1] How do readers' subject positions, that is as cultural "insiders" or "outsiders," affect their interpretations of culturally coded

[1] I use the term "multicultural literature" in Reed Way Dasenbrock's sense of including "both works that are explicitly about multicultural societies and those that are implicitly multicultural in the sense of inscribing readers from other cultures inside their own textual dynamics" (10).

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texts? Most discussions of this question have focused on how critics who too easily assume understanding have misinterpreted coded texts; the best criticism has enabled more informed readings.[2] Such questioning is needed at a time when anything published in English will likely have a diverse readership that comes to texts with varying degrees of critical and cultural innocence and experience.

Scholars of mythical tricksters have long debated the extent to which cross-cultural analyses extend our understanding of how tricksters function in specific contexts.[3] The trickster's notorious transformations encourage comparisons, yet the same variability can mislead. T.O. Beidelman has been the strongest critic of comparative studies, arguing that even "the category of trickster may be merely the product of a series of false translations, much as terms such as family and witchcraft seem incomparable cross-culturally when taken out of context" (175). A cautionary note with regard to the interpretation of ethnographic or oral texts, Beidelman's statement is less helpful in approaching written texts whose tricksters through immigration, travel, or colonization occupy sites between cultures and embody, therefore, traits from the myths of various cultures. More than narratives within oral cultures, trickster texts by Ishmael Reed, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Gerald Vizenor demand a comparative criticism that mediates between various culturally-coded discourses and that is attentive to specifics but aware of similarities.

But this is not to say that studies of oral narratives in discrete cultures are not helpful in reading contemporary texts. One way to relate the study of traditional tricksters in oral cultures to that of contemporary literary tricksters is to foreground the role of performance. Ethnographers have increasingly called for greater attention to the role of performance in recorded oral tellings (e.g. Hymes, Bauman), that is, to the "expressive event" in which the storyteller's idiosyncrasies, the audience's responses, and the social context combine to form how stories are told, heard, and interpreted. Emphasis on performance has reminded scholars that performed narratives are historical; they are inevitably caught up in the political and social exigencies of the moment. The notion of performance is particularly important to a discussion of tricksters because of the capacity of many traditional tricksters to embody multivocality. Most recent trickster theories have made use of the trickster's many voices. Barbara Babcock views the trickster as dialogic in Bakhtin's and Kristeva's use of the term (164). Gates emphasizes double-voicedness. Vizenor explains that in a traditional oral

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[2] See Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers."

[3] William J. Hynes and William G. Doty recount this debate to frame their anthology, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*.

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performance where the teller plays not only the leading roles but also the narrator and the commentator, listeners get the criticism along with the tale (*People* 8).

Also preparing the way for comparative readings of contemporary trickster texts have been studies from ethnographic contexts which focus less on tricksters as "figures" or "characters" than on the language of trickster discourses. For example, Ellen Basso's "discourse-focused and socially contextualized" study articulates how Brazil's Kalapalo understand through tales of tricksters the role of verbal fabrications and illusions in circumventing institutional order and resisting the status quo. Also, Anne Doueihi sees within a classic Winnebago tale an inherent undecidability, a narrative which deals with the problems of interpretation. Even a translated, textualized tale retains the interpretive discourse inherent to an oral performance. And the trickster occupies the space "between discourse and story." Finally, writes Doueihi, "features traditionally ascribed to Trickster—contradictoriness, complexity, deceptiveness, trickery—are the features of the language of the story itself" (308). Doueihi considers that the text may function in the manner of a traditional trickster.

Doueihi provides a good transition between traditional ethnographic approaches to the trickster and more recent literary studies. Gates, for instance, finds in the West African tricksters Legba and Esu-Elegbara metadiscursive qualities similar to those Doueihi describes in the Winnebago story: that is, principles of formal language use and interpretation. For Gates the trickster tradition "defines the role of the figurative," accounts for indeterminacy "as an unavoidable aspect of acts of interpretation" (22), and enables Gates to articulate the intertextuality of African American literature from slave narratives to Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker. Regarding tricksters as problematic interpreters of the figurative suggests not only the significance of contemporary trickster texts, but also the position of the critic who reads them.

In Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* we can begin to see how trickster performance plays with differences between the figurative and the literal and articulates what it means to interpret in ways which reveal the complex interplay between the two.

The title of Reed's novel is also the title of the poem which serves as the novel's invocation and is written by the main character, Raven Quickskill, a trickster combining elements of traditional tricksters from both Africa and Native America. The poem, in which Quickskill addresses (and resists) his Massa Swille, represents a protean literacy that creates a space in which to question authority; he literally writes his way to freedom.[4] But even as it initiates his escape from slavery, the poem takes on a life of its own, becoming a bloodhound on his trail: "It made him famous but had

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also tracked him down" (13). What he writes figuratively, the slave catchers read literally. Thus for Quickskill, the relationship between freedom and literacy becomes problematic. The first words of the first chapter, written by Quickskill after the events of the narrative have taken place, frame the narrative in terms of the difficulties of interpreting tricksterish texts which simultaneously present narration and evaluation:

> Little did I know when I wrote the poem "Flight to Canada" that there were so many secrets locked inside its world. It was more of a reading than a writing. Everything it said seems to have caught up with me. (7)

In part, Reed uses the slave-catchers who read the poem to track Quickskill as symbols of hostile and uninformed critics who wish to control black expression (Fox 71). But neither is Quickskill the one with a stable and "correct" interpretation. Quickskill the writer did not expect to end up, as the poem foretold, in President Lincoln's bed. As the text eludes Quickskill's control, it leads him to ask a crucial question: "Who is to say what is fact and what is fiction?" (7). The shifting text, itself become trickster, forces Quickskill to become interpreter, to ask what the final destination of Canada represents. As Quickskill tries to warn his fellow escapees (the militant, gun-toting 40s and the entrepreneurial Leechfield) that the poem has revealed their physical positions, he finds that it also reveals his ideological position in relation to them. From the poem and the events it sets in motion Quickskill learns that even such seemingly incontrovertible facts as slavery and freedom are variable. 40s informs him that "Virginia everywhere. Virginia outside. You might be Virginia" (76). And looking in the other direction Quickskill slowly learns that "Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind" (178).

Flight To Canada is not unlike *Oedipus the King* which can be interpreted as being about the problems of narration, the dangers of storytelling (Miller 74). When Oedipus acts performatively to put together the pieces into a coherent story, the story turns on him with a vengeance, causing the storyteller to blind and exile himself and his mother-wife to kill herself.[5]

Questioning relationships between fact and fiction, the literal and the

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[4] Robert Stepto uses these terms in identifying the relationship between freedom and literacy as a central theme in African American literature. (*From Behind the Veil* xi)

[5] The connection between Reed and Sophocles is not so far fetched as one might first imagine. Reed's novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* plays on the plot of *Antigone*, and *Mumbo Jumbo* is influenced by *Bacchae*. For a discussion of Reed's use of classical literature, see Fox (60ff).

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figurative, the signifier and the signified, leads toward the center not only of Quickskill's poem but also Reed's novel. In both, exploring these relationships entails reading history, that is, interpreting the events of the past to gain a foothold in the future. Quickskill reveals Reed's preoccupation when he writes, "Strange, history. Complicated, too. It will always be a mystery, history. New disclosures are as bizarre as the most bizarre fantasy" (8). Reed, in a purposefully anachronistic fiction which parodies popular literary genres and satirizes historical figures, "seeks nothing less than the demystification and deconstruction of cultural history" (Byerman 218).

Like Quickskill's poem, Reed's text is "more of a reading than a writing." In other words, it is a performative text containing the voices of the storyteller and the interpreter. The trickster poem that foregrounds textual autonomy and indeterminate interpretation dialogizes the strength of the author's public persona, the voice which debates cultural politics with considerable volume and force. Considered in this light, *Flight To Canada* represents a critical self-awareness for a polemicist like Reed. Keith Byerman reads the novel as arriving at the "paradox of art: only in artifice is reality to be known. There is no origin, no fixed ascertainable reality prior to images of that reality" (234). Reed's central concern is with exposing destructive, enslaving images of reality in order to clear space for an alternative value system based on imaginative, autonomous art and authentic black expression. Yet through Quickskill's trickster poem Reed acknowledges the slipperiness of his own fictions of liberation, and in so doing suggests the difficulties of rebuilding the world which tears itself down from the inside. "Words built the world and words can destroy the world," says Raven Quickskill (81).

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* displays a number of tricksterish traits, especially in its themes of transformation and disguise.[6] Yet the heated debate regarding the "authenticity" of Kingston's use of traditional Chinese texts and her representations of gender might alone be sufficient to regard this text as a trickster.[7] Terms at the center of the debate

[6] According to Bonnie TuSmith, Kingston uses a "strategy of ambiguity" in *The Woman Warrior* which proves her to be a "trickster of literary form in the best American tradition" (252). Sau-ling Wong begins to articulate the book's kinship with traditional tricksters when she writes of *The Woman Warrior* as an exploration of the "art as play" idea (192). In Wong's reading, play in the text is an extravagant gesture in a society which often sees artistic activity as parasitic and in tension with the dictates of necessity.

[7] For an encapsulation of the debate and an explanation of what is at stake on each side, see Cheung, "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific."

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resonate with various trickster discourses even as they bear socially specific significations within Chinese American contexts: the literal and the figurative, fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. To these pairs crucial to the mediations of Reed's novel and most trickster discourses, Frank Chin and others who dispute Kingston have pejoratively added another: the real and the fake.[8]

Mostly, the debate stems from difficulties in reading the book's subtle narration and generic boundary crossing. King-Kok Cheung writes that "Those who attack Kingston for blurring the line between reality and fantasy seem unmindful of the narrator's insistent admissions of her own penchant for fabrication and her inability to discern fact from fiction" (78). Indeed, the book begins with the story of the narrator's mother talking story about the aunt in China who became pregnant and then, disgraced by the village, drowned in a well with her child. The narrator, Maxine, after informing us that her mother "tested [her] strength to establish realities" (5), addresses Chinese Americans specifically: "when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5-6). Maxine then proceeds to speculate various versions of her aunt's experience. However, Kingston places the narrator's limited perspectives alongside the viewpoint of the more mature narrator as an adult. With other voices, notably the mother's, the two perspectives serve to dialogize the text.[9] Through talk story the book continually reminds readers that the contrasting perspectives call into question any one which might seem ultimately authoritative. Near the end, the narrator's mother tells her, "You can't even tell a joke from real life. You're not so smart. Can't even tell real from false" (202).

For alert readers, *The Woman Warrior* is not so much about separating the world (both real and unreal) into fixed oppositions as exploring ways to mediate between them. The book functions like many traditional trickster stories in that it reveals the constructedness of reality. In doing so *The Woman Warrior* tends to expose the essentialist thinking of readers wishing

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[8] See Chin, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake."

[9] Cheung writes in *Articulate Silences* of Kingston's "dialogic vision" represented in the contrasting perspectives of the narrator as child and adult (79). She also accounts for the dialogism in terms of feminist strategies subverting dominant discourses (80). Although Cheung does not mention Bakhtin in her earlier article, "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific," Bakhtin's discussion of epic discourse as monologic and unitary seems pertinent to her discussion of the recuperation of an epic-heroic tradition by Asian American male writers.

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to separate clearly the Chinese from the not-Chinese. Readers become dupes to the extent that they read ethnographically and unquestioningly accept the narrator's momentary strategies for achieving ethnographic authority. More positively, the shifting text places the reader in the position of the narrator who must interpret the relationship between the literal and the figurative so as to fit her own stories with those of the past: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (196). Maturity for the narrator means recognizing her own stories bound up in her interpretations of her mother's stories.

In *China Men*, Kingston uses strategies of mediating between fact and fantasy similar to those in *The Woman Warrior*. For instance, in a play of possibilities much like the speculation regarding the aunt's death in "No Name Woman," the narrator says "I think this is the journey you don't tell me," then tells two different versions of her father's arrival in New York, one illegal, one legal. Much later in "The American Father," she considers in one paragraph three possible ways her father could have been born in America. The narrator's imagination adds varied perspectives to a text which might otherwise seem like a heroic epic. But more clearly than in *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* contains trickster stories told as such. Although these small stories are usually given critical attention proportional to their size, they provide important ways of understanding the text's positioning of its readers and its reassessment of history.

The first comes in "The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountain" which centers on the "talk addict" Bak Goong who invents a number of trickster-like responses to plantation rules banning the Chinese workers from talking. He cannot help but curse the overseers on horseback, so he covers his curses with coughs. He invents the custom of shouting desires, complaints, and secrets into holes dug in the earth: "Talked out, they buried their words, planted them. 'Like cats covering shit,' they laughed" (*China Men* 118).[10] But Bak Goong also performs and tells trickster stories proper. He tells scatological tales about the trickster Chan Moong Gut who dupes others so completely they falsely think they have gotten the best of Chan. Chan so abuses the weak and unsuspecting that "People with the

[10] Gerald Vizenor makes similar use of what he terms "panic holes." Several of his tricksters, including Griever, the American monkey king in China, shout into the earth because only it can contain and transform their rage and frustration. In *The Trickster of Liberty*, Luster Browne "buried his lonesome voice in seven panic holes; there, he believed, the overturned earth would nurture wild flowers with his words, in his noble name. He planted his voice, in this manner, with the seasons: in summer with the moccasin orchids, his solace bloom; on the meadow in spring and autumn; under the cedar in winter" (7).

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name Chan have asked storytellers to change the trickster's name, or to forget those stories in America" (114). These people understand Chan stories as they functioned in their original social context—as providing negative models of behavior. But unlike those who are embarrassed to be associated with the trickster, Bak Goong recognizes in the stories potent, vocal ways to respond to his present oppressive circumstances.

And so Bak Goong acts out a tale when he serves a group of missionary women tea until they finally must retreat to the outhouse where he has painted the rim of the seat red. He lets the rest of the men in on the joke by citing its origins in the trickster tale, "The Story of Chan Moong Gut and the Gambling Wives" (113). From Bak Goong's perspective, the kind but "pesky" missionary women are, whether they know it or not, implicated in the power dynamics of the plantation system where converts "got extra days off on demon holidays" (112). Some of the men pretend to be converts to get the free food at the church services, but Bak Goong's more active performance breaks through the silence imposed upon him and gives voice to his creative expression. In the new land the Chan story no longer reinforces the values of the larger society but becomes relevant to the present through Bak Goong's performance by subverting the dominant power structure. However, in the larger context of Kingston's text, Bak Goong's performance reveals even more about social relationships than he intends. After all, the joke comes to fruition, in both the version he hears and the one he enacts, only when the women's husbands see the red rings and beat their bottoms redder. Oppressive patriarchal social structures render the trick translatable across cultures. Bak Goong ironically makes use of the same forces which feminize and silence him and other Chinese men.

Thus the trickster performance does not merely invert momentarily the dominant and the oppressed or the center and the marginal. Rather, it reveals social relations within both the center and the margin.[11] In the trick's reliance upon intersections between racialized and gendered social positions, that of the officially silenced Chinese men and that of the white women, it resonates beyond fantasies of structural superiority for the inferior. It leads us closer to the heart of Kingston's paradoxical project in *Chi-*

[11] Although Gates's tale of the signifying monkey who provokes bad blood between the lion and the elephant is not structurally analogous to Bak Goong's trick, Gates's comments may pertain here: "While other scholars have interpreted the Monkey tales against the binary opposition between black and white in American society, to do so is to ignore the *trinary* forces of the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. To read Monkey tales as a simple allegory of the black's political oppression is to ignore the hulking presence of the Elephant, the crucial third item of the depicted action" (55).

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na Men: a recovery and evaluation of the historically silenced voices of Chinese men in America, what Donald C. Goellnicht calls "an act of compassion by the female narrator toward the father and a kind of subversive triumph over him" (203).

Bak Goong's trickster performance looks forward to, and suggests ways to interpret, the two short trickster tales following "Sandalwood Mountain." The first tale, "On Mortality," is of Tu who must endure horrific hallucinations silently in order to achieve immortality for the human race. Only when he is reborn as a woman and sees his child about to be killed does he cry out and forfeit everlasting life. The second story, "On Mortality Again," is of Maui, the Polynesian trickster who seeks immortality by stealing the great Hina's heart. As Maui exits Hina's vagina, a bird laughs and awakens Hina who kills Maui by shutting herself. Cheung observes that the two short pieces, "On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again," which "impute the loss of human immortality to the inability to keep quiet," (110) provide ironic intertextual responses to the previous chapter in which Bak Goong invents subversive means to sound his voice. I believe that the intertext flows in the other direction as well, with Bak Goong's trickster tales providing suggestions for how to understand the subsequent stories. Together, episodes in "Sandalwood Mountain" and in the next two stories—all of which have their roots in traditional trickster stories—reveal the constructedness of social orderings and suggest alternatives by implication.

Unlike most of the chapters and subchapters of *China Men*, the two stories have no narrator: thus, the reader is left to make connections with the rest of the book. But just as Bak Goong's performance of traditional tales embodies an interpretation relevant to his own circumstance, so these tales, like most trickster tales, might best be seen as performative interpretations within Kingston's text. Tu's story might be conventionally (that is patriarchally) interpreted as showing Tu to fail his test of silence only when he becomes a woman and, by social implication, weak. But, as a story, "On Mortality" becomes, in the narrator's (Kingston's) context, a performative revision of the first interpretation. Cheung suggests that, "For a mother to scream at the wounding of her child is hardly a weakness" (112). The story resonates with Bak Goong's silencing and emasculation and Tang Ao's forced transformation into a woman in the book's first story to denaturalize social constructions of gender (Cheung 111). All three men experience the physical, intellectual, and emotional pain their patriarchal societies normalize for women.

As with Reed's novel, the trickster stories within the text become a microcosm of the larger work—performances internally dialogized, containing the voices of the storyteller and the critic. As such they not only contain interpretation, they are about interpretation and discerning relationships

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between the literal and the figurative. The dialogized performances of Bak Goong and the narrator (through the two mortality tales) inform readers about the way *China Men* engages history by combining facts with fantasies, imagined voices with documented ones, legal discourses with talk story. Kingston's book can be called, in David Leiwei Li's inspired phrase which suggests the collective oral roots of Kingston's talk story, a "choral performance" (497).

In both Kingston and Reed, trickster texts within texts foreground acts of interpretation to alert readers to the complexities of context within and outside the text and suggest ways to begin understanding that complexity. In short, the trickster text positions the reader. The same can be said of Gerald Vizenor's trickster writings. In a more elaborately theoretical way than either of the other two writers, Vizenor creates open texts which invite readers to take part in creating meaning—even while evaluating meanings which might result.

In the fullest critical response to Vizenor's haiku poetry to date, Kimberly M. Blaeser makes two important and pertinent observations which pertain to this discussion. The first is that Vizenor's haiku approximate oral traditions by remaining "unfixed," that is advertising absences and requiring readers' responses (Blaeser 348). The poems do more than give voice to a salient moment or image: they move the reader toward a "similar moment of spiritual awareness or illumination" (350). The power of Vizenor's haiku "lies in its engagement of the reader's imagination and its ability to move the reader beyond the words to an individual moment of illumination" (351). The haiku dissolves or deconstructs as "art" and transforms into experience (354). In addition, Blaeser points out that Vizenor uses in his haiku methods similar to traditional tribal trickster tales "to shake up the self-satisfied reader" (361). The poems not only present an image, they evaluate implicitly as they reveal the human flaws of his audience and question accepted social orderings. Experiencing haiku quoted by Blaeser will make her argument clearer:

Sliding in the loft
The mice complained all Winter
About the coarse hay

The old man
Admired the scarecrow's clothes
Autumn morning.

Against the zoo fence
Zebras and Sunday school children
Hearing about Africa.

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Vizenor himself writes, "The reader becomes the active listener, the creator, set free in a wordless natural place" (*Matsushima*, pages unnumbered). Vizenor's concern, exemplified in his haiku, with inviting readers of his trickster texts to their own experiences also manifests itself in his prose. *Dead Voices*, Vizenor's most recent novel, collects a series of stories envisioned from the perspectives of animals finding ways to survive in urban landscapes. Vizenor frames the book with a troubled narrator's account of how he heard the stories from Bagese who was born, like one of Houston Baker's blues singers, "on the crossroads at the border of the Leach Lake Reservation in Minnesota" (*Dead Voices* 8). In her old age, Bagese lives as a recluse in a dirty apartment in Oakland, California. Her stories come alive in her words and in the mirrors of her apartment. The unnamed narrator begins the book by telling us that "she warned me never to publish these stories or reveal the location of her apartment" (5). But the narrator decides to write them down and publish them against her wishes and his own promises. Readers turn the page at the end of the narrator's chapter to find Bagese's transcribed stories.

If the warning at the outset places the narrator in a problematic position, it does the same for readers, especially those with any knowledge at all of the history of appropriation and misleading translation of Native American words. Vizenor in particular has written frequently concerning the consequences of the textual fixity imposed upon tribal stories in translation.[12] Readers cannot enter *Dead Voices* through the frame without being implicated in the power dynamics involved in reading. The book traps readers like the double-binding sign: "Don't read this!" In being displaced from their comfort zones, readers are placed in a relationship of difference to the text. Yet in the advice Bagese offers when she tells the narrator to imagine his own stories, the book suggests a way for readers to continue with increased awareness: "The secret, she told me, was not to pretend, but to see and hear the real stories behind the words, the voices of the animals in me, not the definitions of the words alone" (7). By suggesting that the narrator create his own stories, the trickster Bagese makes it possible for him to understand not just her stories but his own desires with regard to the text. To the extent that he is able to create his own tellings and figure

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[12] Vizenor addresses the issue and hints at his alternatives in the preface to *Narrative Chance*: "The immanent pleasures of an aural performance are unbodied in translation; the tribal experiences that were heard in stories, and natural variations on stories, are transformed in publications that are seen as cultural information, some with imposed historical significance....postmodern is a pose in a language game that would convert the institutional power of translation–what is seen and published is not a representation of what is heard or remembered in oral cultures" (x).

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himself in his readings, the narrator may, like Bagese, have "the power and the stories to bring back the dead, even dead voices at a great distance....to transform the world" (19). And in a wonderful conditional to keep us wondering about relationships between the figurative and the literal, the narrator adds, "at least in my mind" (19). Elsewhere, Vizenor writes that "The most active readers become obverse tricksters, the waver of a coin in a tribal striptease" (*Trickster of Liberty* x).

Readers, like the narrator, may come to see tricksters in their mirrored image looking back. This does not mean that the difference of the text is sublimated or effaced; rather, like the narrator at the end of *The Woman Warrior*, active readers of shifting texts may come to know how they tell stories in the act of interpreting. As with Vizenor's haiku, the reader who is counterpart with or complement to the trickster text moves, compelled by the text, toward his or her own experience. Instead of trying to eliminate the difference of the text or appropriate it as their own, readers begin to understand their relationship to it.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat refers to the act of reading as a liminal activity; the critical act of limning notes in the margins is by nature eccentric (xxi). As an antistructural moment and place in which values can be scrutinized (Turner 167), liminality becomes the source of recreative power. Trickster texts cause us to question continually the knowledge and motivations we bring to texts as well as what we wish to take from them. Tricksters alert us to the ways texts invite and repel readers at the same time. Textual tricksters prevent the otherness or difference of texts from being reduced or assimilated, yet they also work against the exoticization of texts. In making us more aware of the stories we tell in our marginal scribblings, trickster texts remind us of both the dangers and the possibilities for revelation in our readings.

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